

Influence and the New American Revolution

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Contemporary political discourse in the United States is rife with ideas on how our society can change and reform — in particular, issues such as campaign finance reform, income inequality, and the use and control of firearms are in need of a comprehensive response that is attentive to the needs and will of the American people. Sadly, the relationship between the American people and our government is currently in a dismal state. This relationship between the people and the government has become unbalanced and unfair, reducing the likelihood of change and deterring individuals from believing in their ability to influence such reform. The need to understand our capacity to effect change, though, is absolutely necessary. The issues facing the American government at this time are as numerous as they are serious, but ideas and proposals are coming forward with the

potential to rebalance this relationship. More importantly, they have the potential to usher in a new American Revolution that makes good on the democratic promise of a government for, of and by the people.

The American public's approval of Congress' progress (or lack thereof) has become the backbone of jokes on late-night TV, and it's not difficult to see why — it's easy to appease an audience that agrees with you. A recent Rasmussen poll revealed that 67 percent of Americans rate Congress' performance as poor (the lowest of five rankings). Sixty-six percent of Americans believe that most representatives "don't care what their constituents think." Perhaps most telling is that in a November 2014 survey, Rasmussen reported that only 11 percent of Americans believed that incumbents are

reelected for faithfully representing their constituents, while 68 percent believe that incumbents are reelected because “the election rules are rigged.”² Put clearly, the American people have very little faith in the capacity of their government to respond to their needs.

This lack of faith comes from a belief in the divergence between the interests of the people and the interests of their government—and the people’s belief isn’t unfounded. A recent study conducted by Martin Gilens of Princeton and Benjamin Page of Northwestern concludes that “economic elites and ... business interests” have a great deal of influence in the formulation of American policy while “average citizens and mass-based interest groups” have little to none.³ They conclude that despite its many democratic attributes, the American system of government is more akin to an oligarchy than a democracy. The will of the people is only enforced when it aligns with, or is irrelevant to, the interests of the elite.

How could it be otherwise in an age of “corporate personhood”, an oxymoron so appalling that even its proponents dare not utter it aloud? The Supreme Court’s rulings in *Citizens United* and *McCutcheon v. FEC* have undermined decades of campaign finance regulations. Wealthy individuals can contribute unlimited amounts of money to SuperPACs and can donate to as many candidates as they please, all under the auspices of democratic free speech. This perversion of the basic relationship between the people and their government has created a fundamental division within our society: At a time when the

gap between the rich and the poor is the widest it has been in decades, the influence of a super-rich super-minority vastly exceeds that of the American people.

Gun Control, the Manchin-Toomey Bill

The issue of gun control presents a clear example of government’s deference to industry in direct defiance of the people’s will. After the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, amid cries for substantive legislation to limit the availability of powerful weaponry to average citizens, one reform that struck a chord with the American people was the notion of universal background checks as a prerequisite to firearm ownership. This measure was supported by 92 percent of Americans (as well as 92 percent of gun owners).⁴ Despite overwhelming public support, the already watered down Manchin-Toomey bill failed to pass in the Senate.

The most contentious provision of the bill were the very background checks favored by a vast majority of Americans, yet the bill failed — in large part due to the intense lobbying effort undertaken by the National Rifle Association (NRA). Not only do a number of gun industry executives sit on the board of the NRA, the nonprofit also receives a constant stream of money from the \$12 billion a year gun industry.⁵ From 2005 to 2013, the NRA received “\$38.9 million from dozens of gun industry giants” in order to facilitate the goals of this multibillion dollar industry. This money is funneled directly to the NRA’s political activities — such as the \$10 million spent to defeat Obama in 2012 in addition to millions every year lobbying Congress. As a result, despite

massive popular support, the Manchin-Toomey bill failed with 54 votes for and 46 against.

Ideology and Corporate Interest

This deference to corporate interest runs rampant across a broad spectrum of policy issues: from the establishment of environmental standards to the preservation of an open and unrestricted internet, the members of our Congress are beholden to the will of the corporate entities which directly and indirectly fund their reelection campaigns. But the influence of the wealthy transcends mere money and has entered the realm of ideology. The policy positions of many of our political representatives are built upon an ideological framework which promotes the interests of the rich at the expense of the average American – look no further than Paul Ryan’s proposed shredding of the social safety net at a time of record corporate profits. Policies which serve to remedy the fact that the top 0.1 percent of Americans possess as large a share of the nation’s wealth as the bottom 90 percent are consistently disparaged by members of the American political establishment as “socialist” or even “un-American” – despite the fact that such policies are in the best interests of the American people.⁶

One such policy proposal is the raising of the minimum wage. The Fight For \$15 movement reflects a consensus among the American people that the present-day minimum wage is insufficient to sustain a reasonable standard of living. Although many Democrats do support this cause, progress has failed to materialize, despite the support of 71 percent of the American people.⁷ After Obama’s call to raise the minimum wage,

Republicans cited the impact that raising the minimum wage would have on industry as their primary motivation for opposing the wage hike, and corporate CEOs flooded the news networks, arguing that such a measure was actually bad for the American people despite their own interests being most at risk.⁸

Unfortunately for congressional Republicans and the titans of industry with whom they have aligned themselves, their key claim — that raising the minimum wage would stunt job creation — is incompatible with reality. According to 2010 study by the Review of Economics and Statistics, raising the minimum wage in the past resulted in “no detectable employment losses.”⁹ Another study conducted by noted economists David Card and Alan Krueger found that raising the minimum wage actually promotes job creation, contrary to the dogma of the fiscal conservative. It seems as though an increase in the minimum wage would benefit all — all, that is, besides the corporations forced to accept diminished profits in exchange for an increase in the quality of life of their employees.

Solutions, State Legislatures and Corporate Influence

Evidently, neither popular opinion nor empirical data are sufficient to sway the American government. Their motivation is neither effective governance nor the will of the people. Our government’s only substantive interest is corporate interest. Wealth and political influence have become so fatally intertwined that they are nearly synonymous. The wealthy hold the keys to the chambers of power at all levels of government. As such, the structure of our government has been

subverted to magnify the power of the wealthy. Sixty-eight percent of Americans are right: the election rules are rigged.

The root of the problem lies with state legislatures. And once again, here the wealthy harbor tremendous power. A study published by Tilman Klumpp, Hugo Mialon, and Michael Williams of the University of Alberta in July 2014 found that in addition to the much-publicized impact of *Citizens United* on federal elections, the Supreme Court decision had a tremendous influence on campaign contributions to state legislatures.¹⁰ Specifically, the study found that “*Citizens United* is associated with an increase in Republican election probabilities” in state-level elections. And it’s safe to say the authors of the study were right; look no further than the gerrymandering of congressional districts by the Republican Party. After the 2014 general election, Republicans controlled nearly 70 percent of state assemblies. As these assemblies determine the boundaries of congressional districts, these boundaries are drawn with a clear partisan interest. This leads to haphazardly drawn maps, constructed so as to restrict minority voters to single districts and split up large voting blocs that would otherwise elect members of the opposing party. As a result, House members fail to accurately represent the interests of their states. As a consequence of the role of partisan state legislatures in drawing the boundaries for congressional districts in their states, Republicans only needed to win 45 percent of the popular vote in order to retain control of the House — the supposed “people’s chamber” of the federal legislature.¹¹

Rebalancing the Relationship, Proposals and Responses

At all levels of government, the influence of wealth on politics has created a system that exists only to serve the interests of the rich. Therefore, the only path to a government truly by, for and of the people is substantive political reform. And a number of proposals for implementing such reform already exist.

One such proposal was made by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) as part of his call for a “political revolution.” In addition to establishing Election Day as a national holiday, Sanders called for the public funding of elections. This call has been echoed by many in the American political establishment, and has the support of 79 percent of the American people.¹² NYU’s Brennan Center for Justice’s proposed solution is to match and multiply individual campaign contributions. Small donations are matched and multiplied by public funds, creating financial incentives for candidates to appeal to all their constituents and encouraging average citizens to participate in the political process. Under the Brennan Center model, a \$50 donation would be matched and then multiplied by, say, five — making it worth \$300 to the candidate.¹³ Not only would this reform make elected officials less reliant on large contributions from wealthy donors, it would likely bring into the fold large segments of the American population which, at the moment, are largely disengaged. The likelihood of “residents in low-income neighborhoods of color” to donate to publicly financed elections is far greater than it is in elections which are perceived as already bought by the super-rich.

Such a change would dramatically alter the dynamics of the American class struggle, and would provide us with a far more representative government than the one we have today.

Another proposal related to campaign finance has been put forth by Wolf PAC, a SuperPAC with the goal of “[taking] away the massive influence that money has over our political process.”¹⁴ The means by which Wolf PAC aims to achieve this goal is a constitutional amendment. Although amendments can be introduced by the federal government, Wolf PAC states that “we can no longer count on our Federal Government to do what is in the best interest of the American people.” Thus, the proposed Twenty-Eighth Amendment would have to be introduced by a convention of state legislatures, a mechanism the founding fathers detailed in the Constitution. By focusing the collective effort of their volunteer base, Wolf PAC hopes to build enough support for their cause to prompt 34 states to submit an application for a constitutional convention. Once the call for the amendment is official, Wolf PAC aims to use the funds they receive to “make every election in the United States from now until this problem is solved a one issue election.” By focusing the nation’s attention on a cause supported by the majority of Americans, Wolf PAC believes that substantive campaign finance reform is a real possibility.

A third proposal for making our government more responsive to our interests focuses not on campaign finance, but rather on reforming the American electoral process. FairVote, a non-profit 501(c)(3) based out of Maryland, aims to “[make] democracy fair,

functional, and representative” by, among other means, replacing the traditional “first-past-the-post” election model with a system of proportional representation.¹⁵ Also known as a “winner-take-all” model or the “single-member district plurality” system, first-past-the-post systems grant total electoral victory to the first candidate to receive a plurality of votes. In such systems, representative bodies are dominated by single parties despite the degree of support received by the other party. As such, all votes not cast for the winner are wasted. In systems of proportional representation – such as the ones used by “more than three and a half million... to elect their local officials in nearly one hundred local governments” – seats are granted based on the percentage of votes cast for each candidate. Such systems serve to subvert the two-party monopoly which plagues American politics, allowing for government to more accurately represent the needs of the entire population.

Conclusion, The New American Revolution

The American people are in dire need of a government responsive to its collective interest. The dynamics of international politics are constantly shifting. Rapidly increasing income equality threatens the democratic foundations of the American government. Climate change poses an existential threat to all humanity. And yet, at home, our government is unable to pass a budget — let alone address the world’s problems. If America is to not only survive, but also thrive in the years to come, it will need a government that is responsive to the needs of the many, not the few. The plutocrats, warmongers and polluters have had their time. The new American Revolution will not require a

single gun or bomb. All it takes is the will to unite and demand a new democracy for the new millennium — a democracy capable of effectively promoting the will of the people. The seeds of dissent have already been sown. It's up to us to make them grow.

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